

## **The Language Movement in Chittagong: A Study on Women's Participation**

Mohammad Humayun Kabir\*

### **Abstract**

*Language Movement is the most valiant manifestation of Bengali nationalism. The Pakistani ruling elite try to establish Urdu as state language by ignoring all democratic norms. But the people of East Pakistan protested against this undemocratic decision and started movement to establish the mother tongue as one of the state language. People, irrespective of gender participated in this movement and this movement spreaded all over East Pakistan not exception in Chittagong. The women's participation in the movements and struggles in Chittagong are well known. The women of Chittagong willingly participated in anti-British movement and all progressive movements of this country. All foremost women of Chittagong, from Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Datta to Pronoti Dastidar, Protiva Mudsuddy, everyone participated from anti-British movement to all the forthcoming movements of Bangladesh. They also actively participated in the Language Movement. The women's participation in the Language Movement of Chittagong and their roles are critically examined in this article.*

**Keywords :** Language, Movement, Chittagong, Women.

The Language controversy or the language debate in the Indian sub-continent is the oldest and a critical issue. After the birth of Bengali Language it had to face political and cultural resistance from Sanskrit. These resistances continued during the Muslim and British rule. But during the British period lingua franca or the common language issue became more complex because Bengali, Hindi and Urdu demanded to be the lingua franca of India. This issue became more complicated when the British government changed the official language of India from Persi to English. India was divided in 1947 with this language intricacy. So the language problem arose in Pakistan as a legacy of Indian sub-continental problem. The West Pakistani ruling class tried to impose the minority group language Urdu as a state language upon the majority group language Bengali, because they thought this way the state

---

\* Associate Professor, Department of Islamic History & Culture, University of Dhaka

would become more consolidate. For this imprudent decision, the East Pakistani people organized movements and resistances demanding Bengali as one of the state languages after the very early birth of Pakistan in 1948. The Language Movements were not limited only in Dhaka city; it spread in the divisions, districts, sub-divisions, thanas, unions as well as villages of East Pakistan. In this movement the women had a large participation along with men.

Pakistan was created in 1947 on the basis of the 'Two Nation Theory', though it was clearly against the state formation spirit of the Lahor Resolution of 1940. Because it was proposed on the Lahor Resolution for a number of 'independent states',<sup>1</sup> but after the election of 1946 the original proposal was changed as 'independent state'<sup>2</sup> in the Muslim League legislators convention held (7-9 April 1946) in Mohamedan Anglo-Arabic College, Delhi, presided over by Mohammad Ali Jinnah (1876-1948AD), the absolute leader of Muslim League. By this decision one Pakistan with two wings was created on 14th August 1947. After the birth of Pakistan it was clearly understood by the East Pakistan that the West Pakistani ruling elite were not aware of the interests of East Wing. The ruling elite showed inability to recognize Bengali as state language with Urdu on the ground of state consolidation, more over, they found subversive activities and foreign incitement with the demand of Bengali as one of the state languages. The language debt, coming from undivided India, turned into a movement in Pakistan though the ruling class tried to stop this with many activities. The Language Movement gradually developed and spread out not only in the capital Dhaka but also all over East Pakistan. All people irrespective of men and women were participated and this made the movement successful.

Language consciousness began to emerge in Chittagong from 1940. *The Simanto* a monthly periodical jointly edited by Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury and Sucharit Chowdhury was published in Chittagong in 1947. All prograssive movements of Chittagong were organized with *the Simanto* centric which had this motto -'men above all', 'secularism', 'against fundamentalism', 'democracy' and 'traditionalism'. Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury wrote an editorial in favour of Bengali as state language in the second issue of *the Simanto*. He wrote-

*By this time many discussions have arose about which will be the state language of East Pakistan. The litterateurs of East Pakistan have sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister, requesting to make Bengali as state language. Their request is not sudden at all. Its source is natural spirit. The question is which should be the state language? If the state is democratic, than the people's languageshould be that in which he speaks ungrudgingly, and in which he is capable of expressing his*

*emotions. That language should be the state language, this is natural. Is there any option for 'but'? But beside this, question arises for but. But this question does not arise from mass people of East Pakistan, but from only a handful of people. Though they are few but they have strong voice, otherwise memorandum or discussions would not have been needed. Mass people would not be suddenly anxious as well with the pressure of this very few. If the mass people's language would not take place in the state than this must be said- hard times for democracy are to come. Dignity of democracy was never given by reciting of democracy. If this is justified to the point of language, Bengali is not ostracized; rather it can comfortably take place in the world of classic literature. If this is justified to the point of people's number, there are very few countries in the world where so many peoples speak in a language. But why should these need to be considered for state language? If the state is for the people than people's language will take place in the state...<sup>3</sup>*

The people of Chittagong became more conscious about the state language by the many report and editorials of *the Simanto* and the discussion of the writers and intellectuals published from different places of the country.

After the birth of Pakistan in 1947 a hartal was called in the whole province of East Pakistan on 11th March 1948 in protest against the undemocratic decision of the Pakistani ruling class. Activities started in Chittagong to make the hartala success. But the villains of Muslim League made obstacles in these activities<sup>4</sup>. The Basic Principles Committee Report of the Pakistan Constituent Assembly was published in 12th March 1948. There were no comments on autonomy of East Pakistan and state language on that report as a result Basic Principles Committee Report against struggle committee was formed by March. Rafiquddin Siddique, the then President of Muslim League of Chittagong was appointed as convenor and Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury and Mahabubul Hoque, the General Secretary of Railway Workers Employee League were appointed as co-convenor. They organized some protest meetings.<sup>5</sup> They went to the villages and tried to make the people that the Basic Principles Committee Report was a conspiracy to establish West Pakistani rule upon East Pakistan and to make East Pakistan as a colony of West Pakistan. After a meeting organized by Basic Principle Committee Report against struggle committee, the people besieged the house of two MLA of Chittagong Nur Ahmed Chowdhury (Chairman) and AK Khondokar and received written undertaking that if they failed to establish Bengali as a state language, they will resign.<sup>6</sup> For many reasons the language

movement of 1948 calmed down in Dhaka and it was affected in Chittagong. Though the direct action was closed but cultural struggles continued.

To establish the demand of Bengali as state language and to strengthen the secular spirit in East Pakistan, progressive organizations named ‘*Cultural Parishad*’ and ‘*Prantic*’, organized cultural conference from 16-18 March 1951 at Harikhola Mat in Chittagong.<sup>7</sup> About seven thousand people attended that conference. Mass people became aware about the state language by this conference. Nearly one hundred girls of Chittagong became politically and culturly conscious by this conference.<sup>8</sup> The demand of Bengali as one of the state languages was established as a strong and tremendous popular through this conference.

The language Movement of Chittagong was organized simultaneously with Dhaka in 1952. On 4th February 1952 in a meeting, the Chittagong district All Parties State Language Struggle Committee was formed, Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury was appointed as convenor and Chowdhury Harun or Rashid and M A Aziz was appointed as co-convenor.<sup>9</sup> The struggle committee declared hartal, procession, and a public meeting at Laldigi Maidan on 21st February. All parties state language struggle committee was also formed in other areas of the district to strengthen the movement of Chittagong. In a stage of organizing the movement, the convenor Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury was attacked by Chicknepox on 20th February.<sup>10</sup> In many places of the city posters were hung on the walls behind the police’s back on 19th and 20th February. Many women also participated in propagating the programme along with the men. The participation of women in writing and sticking posters are mentionable. The role of Mira Sen, Jahanara Rahman, Jawsanara Rahaman, Hosneara Makhi etc. were reknown for their writing and sticking posters.<sup>11</sup> In this context Protiva Mutsuddy said-

*I could not write posters, but I hung posters on the wall which was written by others. I gave speech in the meetings and processions. By this way we organized the language movement in Chittagong.*<sup>12</sup>

On 21st February daylong hartal was observed in Chittagong. All shops, markets, transports, government offices, Schools-Colleges were closed. The people of Chittagong were participated spontaneously in this hartal.

Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury wrote famous poem titled “Kad te asini, fasir dabi niye asechi” (Come for not crying but for the demand of hanging) hearing the new of firing on the procession and killing of the student and public in Dhaka on 21st February. In this context Mahabubul Alam said-

*I was informed of the firing in Dhaka by Khondokar Md. Eliyas, Nurula Amin Nizami with some others at around 4.00pm on 21st February. Khnondoker Eliyas was at the house of his friend Engineer*

*Fazlul Hoque (later on Chairman of DIT). He got this news over the telephone. I became offended after getting this news. My poetic imagination raised inside me. I told Nani Dar to give me a pen. I wrote a poem. Many people said that this poem was written from an instant reaction. But I say no, such a long poem with such content could not be written within two-four or ten minutes. I had participated in the Quit India Movement in 1942 and that consciousness of 1952 was reflected in the poem. So this poem took ten years to be written down.*<sup>13</sup>

After the meeting of Laldigi Maidan in 21st February, the leaders of all the parties struggle committee sat on a meeting that night. They took the decision to run the movement parallel with Dhaka and to observe agitation, strike, public meeting with some other programmes on the 22nd, 23rd and 24th February.<sup>14</sup>

The Chittagong city became resounded by processions and slogans on 22nd February. The participants of the procession gave slogans 'Want blood of Nurul Amin', 'Quit power Nazimuddin' etc. A protest and agitation procession was held by Ezhar, Masudur Rahman etc., and the leaders of the Student Union of Chittagong College. In that procession some girl students of Dr. Khastagir School were joined by the leadership of Halima Khatun. When the procession was passing the Orponacharan Girls College some more girls joined. The girls were picked up in a truck and behind them; the procession marched on via bicycle and foot. The procession marched on round the city.<sup>15</sup>

Many mourn processions went round the city on 23rd February. Besides this, to make the strike and public meeting on 24th February a success, day long propagation was going on. The publicity was done by hollow tube announcement riding on horse cars, sticking posters and distributing leaflets. In this publicity many women participated as well. The women, using hollow tubes, announced the demand of language and they also collected funds to run the movement successfully.<sup>16</sup>

A day long strike was observed in the entire district on 24th February. The railway communication was suspended for the first half of the day. A meeting was held at Laldigi Maidan as a previous decision and more than one lac people had attended. Zahur Ahmed Chowdhury, Chowdhury Harun or Rashid, Professor Sultanul Alam Chowdhury, Azizur Rahman, Rafiq Uddin Siddique, A K Khan gave speech in this meeting and presided over by Mozaffar Ahmed, district President of Awami Muslim League.<sup>17</sup>

Protiva Mutsuddy, Taleya Rahman and some others student of Chittagong College began a small procession at Dr Khastagir school on 25th February. Jawsanara Rahman, Halima Khatun and some others joined from that school. After that, some more girl students were joined from different institutions. These students were going round Chittagong city by trucks. After this procession they strongly protested the firing by police in Dhaka and demanded for the resignation of the Cabinet. They also promised to continue this Language Movement until Bengali was recognized as state language by the Constituent Assembly.<sup>18</sup>

Spontaneous hartal and strike were observed of different thanas of Chittagong after the firing of 21st February in Dhaka. Hartal and strike were observed at Shwandip, Shitakunda, Nazirhat, and Fatikchari along with some other places. Students, irrespective of gender, came from different cities of Chittagong district and joined in the procession later on. Hartal was observed in Chittagong city on 26th February as well. Boy and girl students joined in the procession, coming in the town by buses and trains from Hathazari, Nazirhat, Potiya and from other places. A public meeting was held at Laldigi Maidan on that day.<sup>19</sup>

Later on, meetings, processions were held in Chittagong on 27th and 28th February. Hartal was observed on 28th February. On that day the girl students from different school and colleges of the Chittagong city, brought out a bare foot procession. From this procession they demanded 'resignation of the Cabinet,' 'Bengali as state language' etc. A meeting of more than ten thousand students was held in the evening.<sup>20</sup>

From then on 21<sup>st</sup> February was observed until the year 1956 except for some chaos and problems that occurred in the year 1954.

The women's participation in the Language Movement in Chittagong is mentionable. Their spontaneous participation was noticeable from the publicity to processions and in other sectors. Before 1952 it was really unbelievable to think of women participating in the meetings or processions on the streets. But the women participated in the Language Movement of 1952.<sup>21</sup> Women's participation in this movement was not as a part of much political consciousness or not as a movement of women emancipation. They mainly participated in the demand for their mother tongue and in the opposing against the firing that took place on Dhaka on the 21<sup>st</sup> of February, 1952. The incidents of Dhaka were excellently expressed by a women's (Zeb-un-Nisa Hamidullah) personal reaction as "women's view" was published in *the Don* from Karachi-

*I am expressing myself as a Bangali. I had considered myself souilly as a Pakistani in the past. I considered Bengali language on Bengalism*

*was always narrowness. But now I think this silence needs to be broken. Millions and millions of other Bangalis also feel the same.. To day I must ask- "Did we wish this from Pakistan?" I am very much upset by the news of killing of the students in Dhaka. The soil of Pakistan was coloured red by the blood of young people. This event touched me so much that I could not forget. Provincialism?- always it shows ugly, I always hate this personally. Now, this stigma has been bestow on me, may be I am eligible for this. I prefer receiving this blame than accepting the Ministership of East Pakistan. Most of the Bangali probably would like this blame instead of forgetting their motherland.*

*Trust me- the voice of demand can't be stopped by killing. In most cases, consciousness grows stronger in these sorts of circumstances and those people who do not support any side; they come forward for supporting.<sup>22</sup>*

Along with the men, women's participation was noticeable. In spite of different family barriers, - women did not think that they were different from men. They participated in a normal course of the movement. In this context, Taleya Rahaman said-

*Our times were really different. There were no conceptions that we were different from man or that our thoughts were different than theirs.. Those who participated in the movement went parallelly with men. So when we got out of the house, it did not seem like a dangerous task then. We had to get out and so we did. Our parents worried about us but not we.<sup>23</sup>*

This can be easily said by reviewing the Language Movement held on Chittagong that the Language Movement of East Pakistan was not limited only in Dhaka city. This movement spreaded out all over the province along with the capital. The language consciousness was seen in Chittagong before the partition of India. Language Movement was organized in Chittagong in 1948 after the establishment of Pakistan. The people hugely participated in this movement though the Muslim League was very powerful at that time. After this, movements and struggles were held in Chittagong parallel with Dhaka in 1952 and before the constitutional recognition in 1956. Political, social, cultural, and professional organizations along with the people of different sectors of the society spontaneously participated in the Language Movement of Chittagong. The contribution of workers in this movement is mentionable as well. But the most mentionable side of Language Movement in Chittagong is the participation of women. From organizing the public opinion to participating in the movement and struggle of Chittagong,

## The Language Movement in Chittagong

women's engagement was highly appreciable. The women of Chittagong gave huge momentum in the Language Movement by writing and sticking posters, announcing through hollow tubes, participating in the meetings and processions. The women might have been less in number than men. But irrespective of gender, participation in the movement, of course demanded a great assessment. This role of women in the Language Movement proves the legitimacy of the demand of the entire people of the province. Before Language Movement the participation of women in any movement and struggle in Chittagong or East Bengal was comparatively fewer. But since the Language Movement, women's participation has hugely increased in all the progressive and democratic movements of this province. So this can be said that the Language Movement is a mile stone in the history of women's participation in the movements of the country.

**References:**

1. G.Allana, *Pakistan Movement Historic Documents*, Karachi: Paradise Subscription Agency, n.d., p.172
2. Talukder, Mohammad H.R. (ed.), *Memories of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy*, Dhaka: University Press Ltd. , 1987, p.21
3. *The Monthly Simanto*, Year 1, Issue-2, Editorial, Agrahayan, 1354
4. Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005
5. Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *Chittagong*, Abu Mohammad Delwar Hossain(ed.), The Regional History of Language Movement, Dhaka: Bangla Academy, June 2000, p.88, Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005
6. Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005
7. Dr. Rejwan Siddique, *Cultural Movement and Organisation of East Bengal: 1947-1971*, Dhaka: Gan Bitrony, March 2002, p.181
8. Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005
9. Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *op.cit*, p.89, Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005
10. Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005
11. *Ibid*
12. Protiva Mudsuddy, *Interview* on 28.05.2005
13. Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005
14. Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *op.cit*, p.94
15. *Ibid*
16. Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005, Taleya Rahman, *Interview* on 18.06.2005
17. Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *op.cit*, p.95
18. Protiva Mudsuddy, *Interview* on 28.05.2005, Mahabubul Alam Chowdhury, *Interview* on 25.05.2005, Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *op.cit*, p.96
19. M.A. Barnik, *History of the Language Movement: Incidents and Perspective Analysis*, Dhaka: AH Development Publishing House, January 2005, p.215, Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *op.cit*, p.96
20. Maleka Begum (ed. & com.), *Selected Begum: Social Picture of Half Century (1947-2000)*, Dhaka: Pathak Samabes, February 2006, Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *op.cit*, p.97
21. Taleya Rahman, *Interview* on 18.06.2005, Mohammad Ali Chowdhury, *op.cit*, p.93
22. Maleka Begum, *Op.cit*, pp.78-79
23. Taleya Rahman, *Interview* on 18.06.2005.